

# **Climate Change As Class War**

**A Review**

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As the burning of fossil fuels continues to pump up the size of the carbon dioxide layer in the atmosphere, the global warming crisis becomes ever more acute. In its “Code Red for Humanity” warning in 2021, the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said: “The alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable: greenhouse gas emissions from fossil-fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk. Global heating is affecting every region on Earth...”

But we’re losing the climate battle thus far. In *Climate Change as Class War*, Marxist geographer Matthew Huber argues that the climate movement is losing because it is rooted in the “professional class.” He argues that this class lacks the power to defeat the powerful capitalist interests that drag their heels against the kind of drastic cutting back of fossil-fuel burning that is needed. For Huber, the climate movement needs to be rooted in the working class to have sufficient power to enact radical structural reforms needed to effectively fight global warming.

Huber analyses the existing climate movement as consisting of three layers. First, there are the “science communicators” like James Hansen who try to do popular education about climate change science. A second group are “policy technocrats” with expertise in law or policy studies and work in think tanks, the university world, or non-profits. Their orientation is to craft “smart” policy solutions. A third group are the “anti-system radicals” whose exposure to the science of environmental devastation “leads to a kind of political radicalization.” Huber views these groups as part of the “professional class” and tries to use his theory of this class to explain the politics of the climate movement. Huber pinpoints two features of the climate movement that he sees as sources of weakness: (1) The emphasis on high levels of personal consumption as a factor in global warming, thus leading to a “politics of less” — especially a feature of “degrowth” politics; and (2) an emphasis on science education. “Making climate politics purely about science evades the question of power. It allows us to attribute...inaction on climate change as simply due to misinformation rather than a *lack of power*.”

Huber appeals to the theory of the “Professional-Managerial Class” (proposed by Barbara and John Ehrenreich) to try to explain the origin of these features of the “professional class” climate movement. Here he points to the centrality of credentials which mediates the access of the “professional class” to the labor market. This includes “the existence of a specialized body of knowledge, accessible only by lengthy training,” degree and licensing programs, professional associations, which he regards as “forms of class organization.” This tends to encourage acceptance of meritocratic ideology which favors decision-making power for managers and professionals. This emphasis on the importance of knowledge and the role of professionals tends to favor the science education emphasis of the climate movement, as Huber sees it.

In the Ehrenreichs’ theory of the PMC their class position is based on their control over cultural and social reproduction. This is how teachers and writers are included in the class. Among both Marxists and libertarian socialists, however, class has historically been seen as an institutional group-to-group power relation in social production, as in Marx’s concept of capital as a social power relation. Looking at it from this point of view, I think the PMC theory tends to paper over a distinction between two different class groups. First, there is a group I call the *bureaucratic control class*. This group’s class position is based on their relative monopoly of decision-making power, via bureaucratic hierarchies that exist to control labor and run corporations and government agencies day-to-day. This includes not only salaried managers but high-end professionals who work closely with management to control labor and defend corporate interests, such as corporate lawyers, HR experts, and industrial engineers who design jobs and work organization.

This class power relation is the basis of the clear antagonism between this layer and the working class.

It's noteworthy that school teachers, newspaper reporters, script writers, and nurses all form unions and occasionally go on strike. These lower level professional employees are not usually part of the management apparatus, and don't manage other workers. As such, they have a structural position like the core working class of manual workers, not the bureaucratic control class. The people in this lower professional layer often have college degrees, and sometimes do show elitism towards the core manual working class. They also tend to have more autonomy in their work. However, the "skilled trades" in the early 20th century often showed elitism towards less skilled manual workers and often had relative autonomy in their work. But we generally regard skilled blue collar workers (such as tool and die makers) as part of the working class.

Lower level professional employees may be tempted to middle class meritocratic ideology. As such they will be in a conflicted position, as they also share the subordination of the working class position. This is why Erik Olin Wright's phrase "contradictory class location" is appropriate for this group — a point that Huber concedes.

## **“Degrowth?”**

Many radicals view the growth dynamic of capitalism as the cause of the ecological crises of recent times. This is often summarized in the slogan about the absurdity of “infinite growth on a finite planet.” This has led to the advocacy of “degrowth” in some circles. But it's not clear what this means. George Kallis — author of *In Defense of Degrowth* — explains the degrowth program in this way: “food production in urban gardens; co-housing and ecocommunes; alternative food networks, producer-consumer cooperatives, and communal kitchens; health care, elder care, and child-care cooperatives; open software; and decentralized forms of renewable energy production and distribution.” Although many projects of this sort are worthwhile, it's not clear why a program of this sort would solve the global warming crisis.

Huber tries to frame degrowth as a form of “professional class” politics. But this is not so clear. Urban gardens also exist in poor communities and cooperative projects have working class support.

If we were to take the slogan of “degrowth” literally, it would suggest that the way to address global warming is through an economic contraction that reduces overall production of commodities. According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, carbon dioxide emissions need to fall from their current level of 32 billion tons to 20 billion tons within twenty years. As Robert Pollin points out, an economic contraction of 10 percent — four times greater than the Great Recession of 2007-09 — would push carbon dioxide emissions down by 10 percent, from 32 to 29 billion tons. Thus it would fail to come anywhere near the amount of reduction in carbon dioxide emissions that is needed. And a 10 percent economic contraction would impose draconian austerity on working class populations that are already just getting by. Some defenders of degrowth claim that austerity is not the aim. But what then is their program to solve the global warming crisis?

Huber disputes the view that capitalism creates “aggregate societal growth.” The goal of capitalists is not growth in itself but growth in profits. Capitalists make investments in ventures which produce commodities for sale. They need to make a profit to expand — expand into new

markets, develop new products, hire managers and experts. If they don't do this, other firms will defeat them. Building new markets for their products led to innovations such as the creation of consumer credit in the 1920s, to expand the market for automobiles and appliances. Thus in practice the capital accumulation scheme has led to expanded production of commodities.

Competition forces firms to constantly search for ways to reduce expenses, to maximize profits. They do this at the expense of both workers and the environment. They work to keep wages low, and to find ways to reduce the hours of labor required per unit of output. They might automate an operation or use "lean production" methods to speed up or intensify the work. Stress and chemical exposures have a negative effect on worker health. Firms systematically seek to externalize costs onto others. A power firm may burn coal which contributes to global warming and damages the respiratory systems of people downwind. But the power firm is not required to pay anything for these damages. This is an example of "negative externalities." This concept was introduced into mainstream economics a century ago by Arthur Pigou. Huber rejects the talk of "negative externalities" because of its use by "policy technocrats" who use it to push carbon taxes. For example: "Technocratic construction of emissions as a 'social cost' to be internalized through the market ultimately led to a politics that implied climate action will impose that cost on the working class and the economy at large."

This is a strawman fallacy. Externalizing costs is a pervasive feature of capitalism. This is often used by radical economists as part of their anti-capitalist critique. The cost-shifting dynamic of capitalism is in fact the key structural cause of global warming and other forms of ecological devastation. Without an understanding of capitalism's cost-shifting dynamic, it's not possible to have an adequate explanation for capitalism's tendency to ecological devastation.

## **The Green New Deal as Working Class Program**

Huber argues that the working class is a social change agent with the potential power to push through a radical ecological program such as the Green New Deal. The potential power of the working class lies in two things. First, the working class is the majority — between two-thirds and three-fourths of the population. Second, the position of the working class in the workplaces — the "hidden abode of production" — is a source of potential power. When workers carry out production-halting strikes, they stop the flow of profits, or shut down government agencies.

Huber argues that the working class has material "ecological" interests. "The ecology of working class life," Huber writes, is "about the means of [social] *reproduction* —the ways in which workers reproduce their lives as biological beings outside the workplace." Vulnerability is built into the working class condition. Workers are forced to seek jobs from capitalist employers — to obtain wages for buying commodities needed to reproduce their lives day to day. Working people are vulnerable to periods of unemployment, and to inadequate wages. At present 49 percent of the workforce would have difficulty getting \$400 together for an emergency, according to a YouGov survey. CareerBuilder found that 78 percent of Americans live paycheck to paycheck. Child care is unaffordable and copays and premiums mean working people often cannot afford medical care even if they have insurance. Huber suggests that a "proletarian ecology" would focus on reducing this vulnerability through a relative "decommodification" of the way needs are. "People would intuitively understand jobs, free electricity, or public housing as beneficial," Huber writes, "but it would be up to...organizers to name those improvements as measures taken

to address the climate crisis.” Huber’s favored form of this program is the version of the Green New Deal offered by Democratic Socialists of America.

The interest in ecological sustainability is a specifically working class interest because various sectors of the owning and managing classes have a stake in “prolonging the environmental crisis” as their profit-making strategies are built on ecologically destructive practices. As extreme weather and dangerous heat waves are becoming widely visible, “hunches” that climate change is a problem become more widespread. Thus Huber proposes to “link direct material improvements in people’s lives to climate action.”

Huber envisions a two-stage process for “decarbonizing” the economy. First, move the power industry away from burning fossil fuels. Second, use electrification to minimize carbon dioxide emissions elsewhere in the economy — in transportation, manufacturing, heating and cooking, and so on. Huber thinks it is important to bring electric power industry workers on board with this program, due to their high level of unionization and strategic importance to the economy. Many electric power firms have a major stake in their gas and coal burning power plants. Thus they form a barrier to rapid decarbonization of the electric power industry. This leads to the proposal to use state power to take them over for conversion to renewables. Huber is aware that publicly-owned power systems — such as the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) — have often followed the same practices as the private firms. Thus he thinks the working class would need to use its democratic vote power to push government policy away from burning fossil fuels for electricity.

Due to the importance of the electric power sector to a decarbonization program, Huber wants to get the electric power industry unions to support the Green New Deal program. However, the fossil-fuel burning infrastructure of power firms also has jobs tied to it. Thus the IBEW local at the LADWP has been fighting the closure of three gas-powered thermal plants. Huber is aware of the conservative and bureaucratic nature of unions such as IBEW. He proposes a “rank-and-file strategy” that focuses on building an activist layer to change the orientation of the unions in the power industry. Since the expansion of electricity’s role in transportation, heating and cooking and so on is part of the decarbonization program, this program is in the interests of power industry workers.

Nonetheless, Huber’s strategy is ultimately focused on electoral politics — “stitching together a working class coalition” to take state power. Agreeing with Christian Parenti, Huber suggests that “few institutions besides the state have the *power* to achieve the kind of transformation on the time scale needed.” Only the state has the coercive power to get shut down the fossil fuel industry. And the federal state has the fiscal power to engage in the a “massive *public investment* program” to carry out the energy transition. Huber’s Green New Deal program is seen as a radical reform *within capitalism*. That’s because he thinks it is “outlandish” to expect a shift to eco-socialism in the short time frame needed to address global warming. Although Huber talks about the importance of strikes and disruption as the means to building working class power, his strategy is fundamentally electoral. Working class power built through unions and strikes is seen as the basis of working class electoral power. In his view, a militant and organized working class movement is needed to ensure that politicians carry out the kinds of radical reform the Green New Deal calls for.

Because we need a movement that can push through a radical decarbonization agenda in the immediate future, Huber thinks we need to focus on building the revival of a militant labor movement with an ecological program in *one sector*. Thus he focuses on a “rank-and-file strategy”

in the power industry unions. But his argument is fallacious. First, it's not likely that the revival of class struggle unionism and militant action in a single industry will generate the necessary social power to push through a radical restructuring of the sort Huber is talking about. In the 1930s the stingy American welfare state was the product of a vast, multi-sector working class insurgency. Between 1933 and 1937 there were thousands of strikes each year, hundreds of thousands of workers built new industrial unions from scratch, a thousand workplace takeovers took place, and in 1934 two massive regional general strikes brought into action the maximum social power of widespread class-wide solidarity. This insurgency forced the New Deal to "move left." The worker rebellion spread throughout various manufacturing sectors, motor transport, extractive industries, and sections of retail. These rank-and-file movements developed in different sectors *simultaneously*. So it's not clear why the need for near future change for the climate should require a movement limited to one sector. On the contrary, a class-wide movement is going to be necessary in order to build sufficient working class power.

Many advocates of the Green New Deal include a so-called "Just Transition." This is the idea that in the shift away from fossil fuel burning the displaced workers would be guaranteed income maintenance, re-training, and moving expenses during the transition. The cost of transition should not be borne by the workers in those industries. If fracking is shut down or refineries are scaled back or coal mines are shut down, comparable incomes or jobs for those workers should be guaranteed. If there is going to be a shift to "green" energy projects, we need to make sure that there is a union presence in these jobs and avoid this being just a low-wage sector where capitalists can profit off "green" slogans.

But Huber rejects the Just Transition demand. In his discussion of the concept of "justice", he shifts to a discussion of the community-based "environmental justice" movement. He says this movement has generally failed. And he attributes this to a lack of a strategy for power in "justice-centered" movements. As an argument against the Just Transition, this is a strawman fallacy. In reality the basis of the Just Transition is class solidarity. Denial of this demand would intensify internal divisions in the working class over environmental policy, as fears of job loss spread. On the other hand, a key component of building a class-wide movement is the development of solidarity cross-sector or between different sub-groups of the working class. In the 1930s this form of worker power was demonstrated in general strikes and mobilizing the unemployed to bolster picket lines. But Huber ignores solidarity as a dimension of class power. The vulnerability to boss power in a regime of class oppression and exploitation means that a working class sense of justice is often a motivation for strikes and class solidarity. Thus justice is an important dimension in building working class power.

## **Statist Centralism or Eco-syndicalism?**

In Huber's Kautskyan form of Marxism both the capitalist development of technology and the state are assumed to be class-neutral. That's why he thinks a working class party or coalition could simply wield state power to enact its interests. In reality the state is not class-neutral but has class oppression built into its very structure. For example, public sector workers are subordinate to managerialist bureaucracies just as workers are in the private corporations. The day-to-day workings of state institutions are controlled by the cadres of the bureaucratic control class — state managers, high end professionals employed as experts, prosecutors and judges, military

and police brass. This is in addition to the “professionals of representation”—the politicians—who are typically drawn from either the business or bureaucratic control classes, that is, classes to which working class people are subordinate. Statist central planning can’t overcome either the exploitative or cost-shifting logic of capitalism, which lies at the heart of the ecological crisis. Various forms of pollution and ecological damage will continue even if some form of the Green New Deal were carried out.

Huber writes:

“We love to hate big, bulky centralized electric utilities, but they are actually precisely what Marx — and Kautsky...meant by *socialized production*...The material necessity of balancing supply and demand means modern grids and centralized utilities are inherently *socialized planning machines* that involve measuring and predicting millions of households and businesses’ electricity consumption every day.”

Actually socialization requires both worker collective control of the labor process — the day-to-day operations of the industry — as well as direct, democratic social accountability. Both of these things are absent in the case of the corporate utility firms. Large corporations like Walmart or General Motors or the utility firms do have systems of centralized, top-down control that can plan their operations in advance to meet consumer demand. The top-down managerial bureaucracies of the corporations also exists for the control of labor — as with the vast work intensification of the past forty years — and keeping the whole operation tied to the profit-making goal of the owners.

Huber tends to prefer the centering of electricity production in large power plants rather than distributed solar and wind systems. He confuses centralization of production with coordinated production. There is no reason a large electric power organization could not adopt a program of setting up solar panels on rooftops and over parking lots — coordinated throughout a large urban region. Top-down centralized planning — whether done by a corporation or the state — is also inconsistent with worker control of production, as was clear in the Soviet Union.

*Eco-syndicalism* provides an alternative approach. This is based on a recognition that workers are a potential force for resistance to decisions of employers that pollute or contribute to global heating. An example of working class resistance to environmental pollution were the various “green bans” enacted by the Australian Building Laborer’s Federation back in the ’70s — such as a ban on transport or handling of uranium. An example in the ’80s was the organizing work of Judi Bari — a member of the IWW and Earth First!. Working in the forested region of northwest California, she attempted to develop an alliance of workers in the wood products industry (and their unions) with environmentalists who were trying to protect old growth forests against clear-cutting. An argument could be made that sustainable forestry rather than clear-cutting was in the interests of the workers. In a similar way an argument can be made that a society-wide decarbonization program is in the interests of power industry workers as it would ramp up the demand for electricity. Powerful working class social forces organized independently of the politicians and building disruptive mass actions can be a major force to push for the changes in policy that move us away from fossil fuel capitalism.

The syndicalist strategy proposes the development of unions self-managed by workers, building an active resistance day-to-day in the workplaces, building class struggle militancy, and bringing working class unions and social movements together on a wide scale — to build an alliance



that has the power to transition society to a self-managed form of eco-socialism. Huber agrees with the building of a revitalized labor movement and increased levels of strike action. These are the kinds of working class self-activity that can power the process of *class formation*. Class formation is the more or less protracted process through which the working class overcomes fatalism and internal divisions (as on lines of race or gender), acquires knowledge about the system, and builds the confidence, organizational capacity and the *aspiration* for social change. This is the process through which the working class “forms” itself into a force that can effectively challenge the dominating classes for control of society.

Thus a strategy of building class struggle unionism, worker strikes, and wider connections of solidarity among unions and social movement organizations is both the strategy needed to build working class power to push through a radical reform of the Green New Deal variety, but is also the strategy needed to build for the transition to self-managed eco-socialism. The syndicalist vision of self-managed socialism provides a plausible basis for a solution to the environmental crisis because a federative, distributed form of democratic planning places power in local communities and workers in industries, and thus they have power to prevent ecologically destructive decisions.

A shift to a worker-managed eco-socialism is necessary to change the nature of technology used in social production. This would enable workers to:

- Gain control over technological development,
- Re-organize jobs and education to eliminate the bureaucratic concentration of power in the hands of managers and high-end professionals, develop worker skills, and work to integrate decision-making and conceptualization with the doing of the physical work,
- Reduce the workweek and share work responsibilities among all who can work, and
- Create a new logic of development for technology that is friendly to workers and the environment.

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